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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000358

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/3/13

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PHUM CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Chief LTTE negotiator in Sri Lanka to prepare for next round of talks

Ref: (A) Colombo 229 and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham is visiting Sri Lanka from March 2 to 16. The visit is seen by many as an opportunity for Balasingham to prepare for the next round of peace talks and to brief the LTTE leadership on the international community's view of the LTTE. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On March 2 LTTE chief negotiator and leading theoretician Anton Balasingham arrived in Sri Lanka for discussion with the LTTE leadership in preparation for the March 18-21 round of peace talks being held in Japan. Balasingham is scheduled to meet with a wide variety of LTTE representatives during his stay of almost two weeks. He is reportedly scheduled to meet with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran sometime on March 3.

¶3. (C) In reviewing the reason for Balasingham's visit, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress and member of the Tamil National Alliance, believes that clearly the most important reason for the visit is for Balasingham to receive instructions for the next round of talks. Particular emphasis, according to Ponnambalam, will be placed on the financial structure between the GSL and LTTE and on the steps the government must take to attain "normalcy" for Tamil civilians. Ponnambalam, who recently met with the LTTE leadership, commented that the LTTE is concerned about how it will raise taxes and how it will be able to distribute any funds donated by the international community. The LTTE believes it has a right to tax the people in the north and east and wants to make sure that its right to do so is acknowledged by the GSL.

¶4. (C) Ponnambalam further reported that the issue of normalcy for Tamils, with a focus on resettlement of IDPs and the military security zones in Jaffna, is of paramount importance to the LTTE. He commented that the LTTE had considered postponing the talks scheduled to take place in Japan March 18-21, because the GSL was not working towards normalcy quickly enough. Particularly the ministry responsible for resettling IDPs had no plans and was just permitting a bad situation on the ground to get worse. Multiple families claiming the same house, families not being able to return because of security zones, and families impoverished for more than a decade were among the problems Ponnambalam cited. Based on this assessment, Ponnambalam believes that Balasingham will hear a chorus of voices, including Prabhakaran's, instructing him to push for the government to implement further humanitarian improvements. The hard-line LTTE cadre will argue that they are unable to see improvements on the ground and will push Balasingham to get concessions from the Sri Lankan military.

¶5. (C) Other observers add that although the stated purpose of Balasingham's visit is to prepare for the next round of talks there are a number of bonuses to the trip. Perhaps most importantly, according to Jehan Perera the director of a well-regarded local think tank, is that Balasingham will expose the LTTE to the views of the international community. He commented that many of the cadre isolated in the LTTE controlled Wanni, in northern Sri Lanka, rely on each other to reinforce their preexisting views while Balasingham will expose them to new trains of thought. Kethesh Loganathan of the Center for Policy Alternatives, another local think tank, agrees that the trip might expose the cadre to a more moderate view of the LTTE's struggle, but he questions how much influence Balasingham will have on the second tier of LTTE leadership.

¶6. (C) All of the interlocutors agreed that having Balasingham in the Wanni would increase the international community's access to Prabhakaran. Tomas

Stangeland, Political Officer at the Norwegian Embassy, commented that Prabhakaran tends not to meet with representatives from the international community when Balasingham is not present. The Norwegian Embassy has confirmed that Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen is scheduled to meet with Prabhakaran on March 14. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission has also confirmed that Tryggve Tellefsen the new Head of Mission is scheduled to meet with LTTE leadership on March 5. Some Tamil National Alliance MPs are scheduled to meet with Balasingham on March 7. Other likely visitors include representatives from UNICEF and Ian Martin, formerly of Amnesty International, who will address humanitarian issues. (Note: The press is speculating on numerous possible visits, only a few of which may actually take place. For example, Tamil Net states that Yasushi Akashi, Japan's special envoy to Sri Lanka, will be meeting with Balasingham and Prabhakaran, Koji Yagi of the Japanese Embassy, however, has confirmed that Akashi does not plan to visit Sri Lanka again before the next round of talks.)

17. (C) Comment: Balasingham attended two rounds of peace talks without first visiting the Wanni. Observers have commented that this isolated the hardcore LTTE more from the peace process and limited what Balasingham could commit to. Now everyone supporting the peace process sees Balasingham's visit as crucial in forwarding the peace agenda. At the same time that the LTTE is expecting Balasingham to get the GSL to deliver on its demands during the talks, observers are hoping that Balasingham will be able to drag hard-line LTTE cadre into the peace process. End Comment.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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